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ABSTRACT

When children experience serious problems with peer relationships there is increasing evidence that these children are at risk for a variety of adjustment problems later in life. This study utilized a variety of interventions to decrease negative behaviors in an active 4-year-old in a preschool setting referred by his teacher for noncompliant, aggressive, and socially inappropriate behaviors. The subject's negative behaviors were counted in observations lasting one hour per day, 5 days a week for approximately 5 weeks. After establishing a baseline of positive and negative behaviors, three interventions were attempted. The first intervention was extinction and shaping. Extinction was used to reduce negative behaviors. Teachers were encouraged to develop a high tolerance for minor negative behaviors. Shaping with positive reinforcement was used to increase positive behaviors. Teachers watched for positive behaviors and rewarded the subject immediately with social reinforcers. The second intervention added coaching to extinction and shaping in which discussion of negative behaviors was used. The third intervention added parental involvement. Results showed the techniques of extinction and shaping to be effective in reducing the subject's negative behaviors from an average of 16 per hour to 9.7 per hour. Coaching did not improve the outcome and there was not adequate time to access the effect of parental involvement. (ABL)

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TEACHER AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE
TREATMENT OF A PRESCHOOL ANTISOCIAL CHILD

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It should be a matter of concern to parents and teachers when a young child experiences serious problems with peer relationships. There is increasing evidence that such children are at risk for a variety of adjustment problems later in life (Coie & Kupersmidt, 1983; Hazen, Black, & Fleming-Johnson). Teachers have long observed the "snowball effect" of maladaptive or antisocial behavior; a child's negative behavior causes him to be rejected, which in turn causes him to retaliate even more negatively (Moore, 1967). When this pattern develops, it can be very difficult to change. The child develops low self-esteem and expects to be rejected which perpetuates the problem. Other children and adults soon label a child as a "trouble-maker" and continue to view the child from that perspective even when the child's behaviors change (Asher, 1983; Hazen et al, 1984). It is critical, therefore, to interrupt this cycle of social rejection. This study was designed to utilize a variety of interventions to decrease the negative behaviors of a preschool child.

METHOD

SETTING

The study was conducted in a preschool classroom with 20 preschoolers between the ages of 3 and 5 years. There were generally three adults in the classroom: a teacher, a teacher aide, and a practicum student. Other adult observers and helpers were often present. The day was typically divided into freeplay, large group activities,

small group activities, snack time, and outdoor play. The class was held from 12:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. five days a week.

SUBJECT

Jimmy was an active 4-yr-old boy who had been enrolled in the preschool for six months. He was referred by his teacher and teacher aide for treatment because of his noncompliant, aggressive, and socially inappropriate behaviors. He was reported to have a history of these types of behaviors in other nursery school settings.

Jimmy's developmental history was characterized by numerous separations and a chaotic home life. His parents were divorced and he lived with his mother, a full-time college student who was unable to provide him with consistent, loving attention. He rarely saw his father but visited frequently with his paternal grandparents. At the time of the study, his mother was finishing her college work, looking for employment, and planning a move. During the final two weeks of the study, Jimmy's mother reported that he was very unsettled, having nightmares and asking if she was going to leave him. One night she found him asleep by the front door.

Observation and sociometric data indicated that Jimmy was a "controversial" child as defined by Dodge (1983) and Hazen et al (1984). He experienced both high social acceptance and high social rejection. Jimmy clearly sought social acceptance and utilized an adequate range of prosocial behaviors, such as rough and tumble play, sharing, play organizing (e.g., "Let's play_____."), assistance, affection, and questions (Dodge, 1983; Strain & Odom, 1986). However, in many

situations, Jimmy appeared to focus intensely on his own needs and would act impulsively, disregarding the rights and needs of others. Thus, he had a high frequency of inappropriate and aggressive behaviors. These antisocial behaviors provided Jimmy with much attention. The adults in the classroom, as well as many of the children, noticed and responded to the majority of Jimmy's negative behaviors. His name was called aloud very frequently and much time was spent reprimanding him.

SOCIOMETRIC DATA

Sociometric data was obtained using a free-choice, positive nomination technique (Asher & Renshaw, 1981; Halliman, 1981). Each child in the class was asked in a private interview to name the children he or she would most like to invite to his or her birthday party. The child's score was the number of nominations received from classmates. Jimmy received six nominations, placing him in the top third of his class. Only two children received more nominations, each having eight. Two children volunteered the information that they would not invite Jimmy.

DEFINITIONS

Information from the teachers plus observations of Jimmy suggested the following behaviors be defined as target behaviors:

1. Negative behaviors
 - a. Noncompliance (with teachers and peers)
 - b. Negative verbal behaviors
 - 1). Antisocial comments (rude, threatening, or negative remarks)
 - 2). Complaining and whining
 - 3). Boasting
 - 4). Lying

- 5). Interrupting
- c. Negative physical behaviors
 - 1). Pushing, hitting, biting, pinching, kicking, poking, etc.
 - 2). Making faces (sticking tongue out, etc.)
 - 3). Inappropriate touching (nonaggressive touching that the other child does not like)
 - 4). Attacking, bothering, or taking other child's property
- 2. Positive behaviors
 - a. Compliance (with teachers and peers)
 - b. Giving attention, approval, acceptance to others
 - 1). Listening
 - 2). Submitting to other's wishes
 - 3). Sharing
 - 4). Helping others
 - 5). Appropriate touching

After discussions with the teachers and observations of Jimmy, the following reinforcers were selected:

- 1. Immediate social reinforcers
 - a. Smile, wink, etc.
 - b. Touch or hug
 - c. Positive comments
 - d. Call name aloud
- 2. Interval reinforcers
 - a. Special privileges (based on the situation), such as being first, helping with a task, sitting by teacher or in her lap, or spending time alone with teacher
 - b. Positive note to mother

OBSERVATION AND RECORDING

Jimmy was observed one hour per day, five days a week for approximately five weeks. The observation times were varied so that he was observed during all periods of the school day. The observer was in the room with the children and interacted with them in a manner similar to the student helpers (talking and playing with them and helping them with their projects). A counting bead bracelet was used to count negative behaviors. The count was then recorded daily on a data form.

PROCEDURES

Baseline: (Days 1 to 7). Jimmy was observed for seven days without systematic intervention. During this time, teachers responded to Jimmy's positive and negative behaviors as they normally did.

Extinction and shaping: (Days 8 to 13). Extinction was used to reduce negative behaviors (Pinkston, Reese, LeBlanc & Baer, 1973; Teaching Research Infant and Child Center, 1975). Teachers and aides were instructed to ignore the negative behaviors that were not damaging or disruptive. They were encouraged to develop a "high tolerance" for these minor negative behaviors. If the behavior continued to the point that it became damaging or too disruptive, then Jimmy was corrected with minimal attention, such as a look and a shake of her head or a firm grasp and look with a shake of her head. If the behavior continued, Jimmy was placed in a "time-out chair" with no discussion. If Jimmy attacked another child, the adults intervened, ignoring Jimmy and attending to the other child with statements such as: "I'm sorry that happened to you. Would you like to play with this nice truck?" Although this technique can be called extinction, it may harbor a mild punishment contingency also (Pinkston et al, 1973).

Shaping with positive reinforcement was used to increase positive behaviors (Asher, Oden, & Gottman, 1981; Eisenberg, Cameron, Tryon, & Dodez, 1981; Pinkston et al, 1973; Putallaz & Gottman, 1981). Throughout the day, the adults watched for positive behaviors and rewarded Jimmy immediately with social reinforcers. Interval reinforcers were used whenever he displayed no negative behaviors within a ten minute period.

A positive note to his mother was sent home when his negative behaviors were less than during the observed time period.

Coaching plus extinction and shaping: (Days 14 to 21). Coaching was used for teaching specific social skills (Asher et al, 1981; Asher & Renshaw, 1981; Putallaz & Gottman, 1981). The teacher used this technique whenever there was an appropriate opportunity. She was careful to not use it immediately following a negative behavior and thereby reinforce it. The intervention usually consisted of discussing: 1) the consequences of a negative behavior, 2) the effect it had on others, their reactions and feelings, and 3) alternative behaviors.

Parental involvement plus coaching, extinction and shaping: (Days 22 to 25). Consultations with Jimmy's mother were included in the final part of the intervention program. During the initial session, information was obtained regarding Jimmy's prenatal and birth history, his early development, his past and current health, and his daily habits, such as eating and sleeping schedules. Because Jimmy often appeared tired and sleepy, it was suggested that he might need an earlier bedtime. The home situation and family relationships were also discussed. The intervention strategies being used at school were outlined and suggestions were made regarding their use at home.

The paternal grandmother attended the second and final interview. During this session, Jimmy's mother discussed openly the deep frustrations she was experiencing as a single mother. Her current school/work situation plus her own emotional difficulties were creating an intensely stressful situation for Jimmy. It was recommended that she and Jimmy obtain professional family counseling. The importance of a

stable, quality day care program for Jimmy was also emphasized.

RESULTS

At baseline, Jimmy's negative behaviors averaged 16 per hour with a range of 5 to 29. With the introduction of extinction and shaping strategies, his negative behaviors dropped to 9.7 per hour. When coaching was included, the behaviors increased slightly to an average 10.1 per hour. After consulting with Jimmy's mother, the behaviors averaged 9.5. The average negative behaviors demonstrated during the total intervention period was 9.8 with a range of 4 to 15. Figure 1 demonstrates the incidences of negative behavior during the baseline and intervention periods.

DISCUSSION

It appears that the techniques of extinction and shaping were effective in reducing the amount of Jimmy's negative behaviors. The introduction of coaching did not improve the outcome. Although there was a very slight improvement after parental involvement was introduced, there was not adequate time to accurately assess the effect of that intervention.

This study and others (Dodge, 1983; Hazen et al, 1984) point out three significant pieces of information about controversial children. First, unlike neglected and rejected children, controversial children are not lacking in a knowledge of social skills. Second, in many situations they tend to focus on their own needs and thus show a high frequency of antisocial behaviors. A study by Denham (1986) confirms the importance

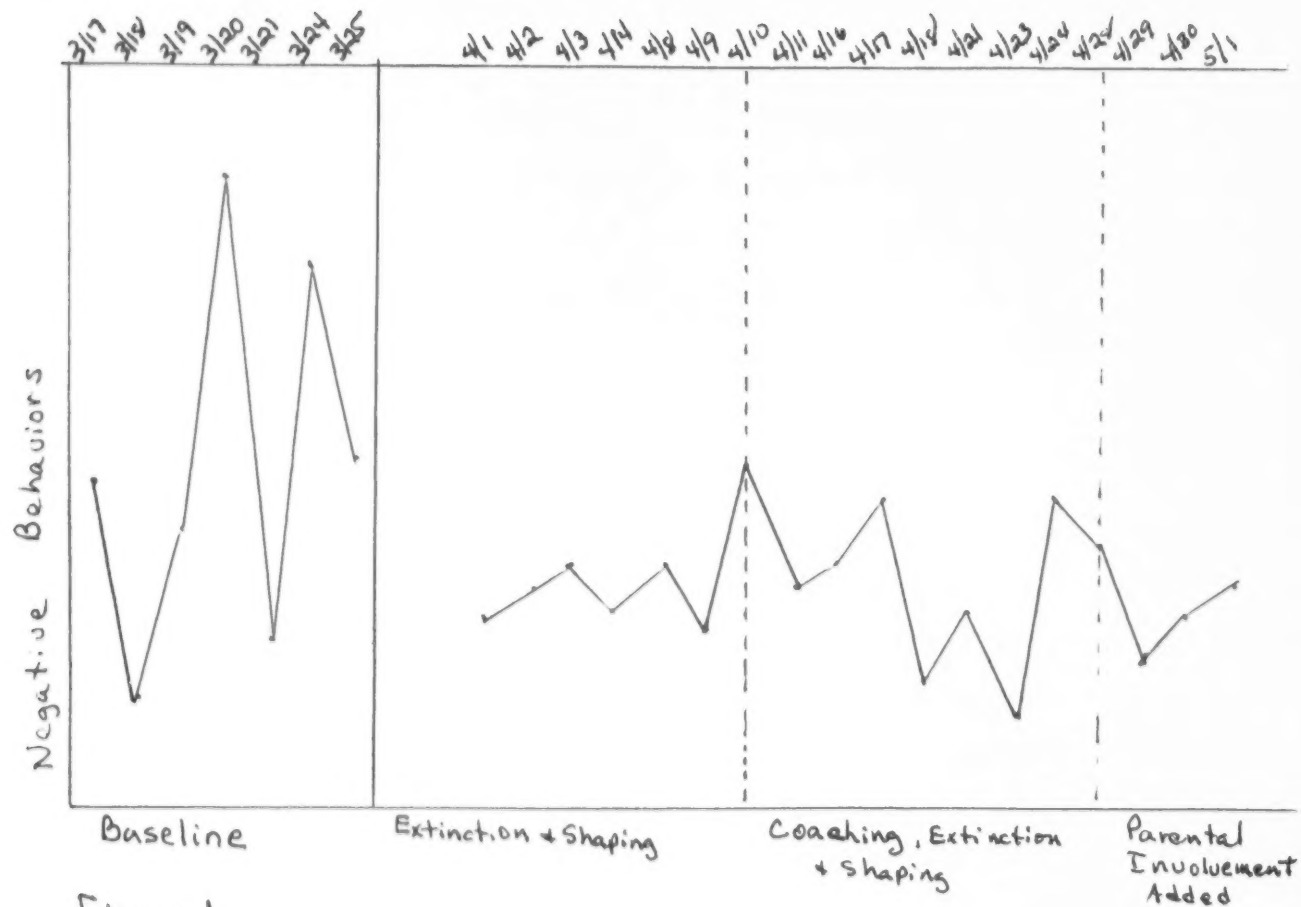


Figure 1.

of affect on prosocial behaviors in children. When emotional needs are not being met, antisocial behavior is more likely. Third, there is some indication that these children may receive more attention for their negative behavior than other children. A study by Dodge (1983) showed that the adult leader reprimanded the controversial boys twice as frequently as she did the other boys.

If these differences are genuine, the implications for intervention strategies are quite significant. First, since these children evidently have adequate social skills, social skills training through coaching and modeling may not be needed. Second, if controversial children are focusing on their own needs due to emotional difficulties and/or family problems, such as in Jimmy's situation, parental involvement and counseling would be very important. Third, if these children are receiving an unusually high amount of attention for negative behaviors, extinction would be an important strategy. Positive reinforcement of positive behaviors would also be critical so that the child does not experience an extreme drop in the amount of teacher attention. Another important intervention might be behavior modification techniques and cognitive behavioral techniques to help modify impulsive behaviors. This would be especially useful with older children (Keogh, 1971; Rosenbaum & Drabman, 1979).

Another insight that was gained from this study is the importance of teacher preparation and parental education. For any intervention program to be effective, all the significant adults must work as a team. It is the responsibility of the consultant to make sure that all aspects of the program are understood and accepted. Lerner (1985) has outlined the

following principles for consultants to follow:

- 1) Make certain there is a common perception of the goals and objectives among the various persons involved.
- 2) Maintain open and clear communication
- 3) Clarify the responsibilities of all persons involved
- 4) Have methods for resolving any conflicts that arise
- 5) Provide adequate time for planning and evaluating the program

A small study like this highlights the importance of research in the social sciences. To design an effective treatment plan, one must not only know the special, unique qualities of an individual, one must also have broad base of empirical knowledge. By utilizing these two vital sources of information to involve and prepare teachers and parents, it may be possible to produce long-term positive behavior change in children.

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